



Q&A

Identities



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Shifting Identities



Introduction

This text comprises two components that are meant to be read in parallel – the “narrative” (right-hand pages) and the “thesis” (left-hand pages) – starting from the “preface”.

The narrative

The text examines how identity is shaped, while it presents the process of subject formation as a constant negotiation with external forces. How do we come to know ourselves when the terms of self-definition are not entirely ours to begin with? Is there a core, an ultimate self that we can reach?

This project aims to show that identity is not fixed, but layered and shifting, and that while categories, such as gender, age, and motherhood, operate as structuring forces, we can resist binary oppositions and pull towards multiplicity, using the potential and the generative qualities of language.

Person and pronouns change constantly in the narrative: to what extent do gender and grammatical number dictate our understanding of the story? Semantic fluidity and shift, resistance, and the pull towards certain word clusters are battlefields where meaning and identity are resolved and at the same time created, in parallel. Interactivity and the social dimension are emphasized in the story as essential for providing affordances that help us move away from unconstructive polarities.

The thesis

There's a methodological ambition here: Phenomenology, linguistics, narrative psychology, and social theory come together in a hybrid approach that performs the complexities of identity through form.

The thesis has developed organically from annotations of the text and functions as a critical apparatus, an inner dialogue that shapes the way the story is understood, reinforcing the idea that meaning is constructed in layers, that identity is always in negotiation between text, interpretation, and context. Writing becomes a recursive system, a form of computational poetics, self-examining and self-

modifying, shifting meaning through time and perception, mapping how identity is both emergent and imposed. The arguments go beyond explaining, to enacting the instability of meaning and the fluctuation of categories.

Fiction and critical theory intertwine in a layered approach, in a meta-text that does more than narrate — it dissects, performs, and destabilizes notions of identity and meaning-making, offering both an embodied experience (the protagonist's journey) and a meta-awareness of the forces at play (the thesis).

Essentialism and the self

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that individuals are often trapped by the roles and labels imposed by society, yet authentic existence requires a conscious refusal of these externally assigned identities (1943/1956, pp. 101-102). His view is an essentialist one, silently supporting the idea of the one true self, a core identity that needs to be discovered and defended. The main character of the story initially shared this feeling of being trapped, this need to refuse what was assigned to them and to defend what felt real.

While appealing, this notion of the stable self can lead to deterministic, dead-end views of identity. It is built on constructed oppositions that are socially accepted and systemically promoted, and manifest in biased language and gestures: "Beautiful" vs "ugly", "good" vs "bad", "success" vs "failure", are examples of binaries that support a rigidity which hinders the negotiation of identity in a constructive, generative manner.

Negotiating identity

Erik Erikson discusses identity crisis (1968, pp. 22-23) and adopts a relational view that bridges psychoanalytic developmental theory and social interactionism.

The heroine of this story underwent a similar process of questioning and reconstructing their sense of self through continuous negotiation, and this project revolves around the notion that such negotiation relies largely on learned intellectual capacity: Breaking out of a binary and static perception (black-white, good-bad etc.) leads to an open understanding of selfhood, multiplies positive future visions and helps us balance between the gravitational pull of essentialism and the ethereal forces of constant motion.

The relational view of the self

While reactive negation and rupture with a perceived "other" are often opportunities for change - as happens to our protagonist - we could also benefit from interacting with the "other" on the basis of exchange.

Preface

"We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us".

– Jean-Paul Sartre

Few opportunities are more fortunate than an identity crisis.

When you come to question – fundamentally question – your own identity, you dismantle everything: your beliefs, your upbringing, your education, the meaning of “contemporary” and the meaning of “progressive”. The meaning of friendship. The meaning of “I love you”. You question the meaning of “truth”. What constitutes the “truth”? What constitutes you?

One needn’t be a linguist or a philosopher to understand that the meaning of abstract words depends on conceptual and social factors.

Sociopolitical context, as well as the personal background and the self-perception of the people whose opinions affected me – family members, teachers, peers – were equally important in the deciphering of the words that shaped me.

I had to go back a thousand times.

Was a self without external influence even an option?

Could I remove the
residue
of other people's opinions
of my own
upbringing and cultural influences
religious influences
structural influences
systemic
influences?

Trying out roles and traits inspired by difference can be a playful act and none of the aspects tried has to carry the stamp of the definitive. Labels are harmful, exactly because they imply a permanence that the individual often feels obliged to accept as true and act accordingly. The Greek proverb “it’s better to lose an eye than to gain a nickname” sums it up well.

Playfulness, when we navigate roles and expectations, should be allowed and fostered. Its performative dimension provides a safe space to interpret and exercise identity (as the interactionist Erving Goffman also noticed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1956, p. 17]): It helps us virtualize the potential for change and opens up possibility.

Essentialism and relationality in language

Our perception, the way we distinguish, unify and fluctuate between ideas of selfhood, relies largely on the affordances of language. To put it simply, to make an omelet, you have to have eggs. If “girl” means only one thing, and if it’s the only egg you’ve got, then you will probably stay very close to the definition it provides.

To examine the importance of language in the perception and negotiation of identity, it is crucial to observe how we relate to meaning in general: Sartre’s idea of identity falls within a structuralist system of thought, where opposition is central in the creation of meaning.

Jacques Derrida takes binaries a step further and discusses hierarchical oppositions, thus relations of power within meaning-making. For him, the negotiation of meaning is a process of deconstruction. Words gain significance through the endless opposition and the continuous reinterpretation of concepts (*différance*) (Derrida, 1967, pp. 278-280).

Pragmatics, sociolinguistics and philosophy agree that meaning is not inherent. Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, §43) supports that meaning emerges from word use within specific social contexts. Abstract words – such as “justice” or “freedom” – lack fixed referents and gain significance from collective conceptual frameworks and lived practices. These frameworks and lived practices are our playgrounds and battlefields.

Useful in our effort to make meaning meaningful and avoid getting lost in a relationality that leaves language powerless would be to argue that there

To safekeep the parts of myself I valued, I had to change the way I related to words: The words that were directed towards me, as well as the words I chose to define me. Meaning wasn't a finite value but a non-conclusive movement that allowed perpetual development.

Chapter I

I was born a female.

At a time when ultrasound wasn't accurate enough to determine a fetus's sex, gender was predicted by heart rate. As stated in the family lore, the oracle-obstetrician prophesied that I was either going to be a dumb boy or a smart girl.

I was born a female, and thus declared "girl", but with a twist: I was also proclaimed "smart".

But even when their sex was officially assigned and they were dressed as a "proper" baby girl with the pink and the skirts and the flowers (as lore decrees), people would still mistake them for a boy: A story that their mother repeated so often that it left a lasting impression on them.

My mother preferred itchy wool sweaters and chocking turtle-necks, and disapproved of tutu skirts, ribbons and polka dots. Her taste was enforced, so I skipped the latter. Maybe these were the undebatable feminine marks that people missed.

In any case, from before they were born and for quite some time after they saw their first February sun, people had doubts about their gender. Perhaps this ambiguity of constructed polarities sowed the seeds of a future identity crisis but also fermented a deep desire to resist injustice.

is the archetype of the word and its potential – close to what Gilles Deleuze calls *virtuality* (1966, pp. 96–98). What can “cute” and “naughty” be translated into, what are the particulars that fill in the basic outline of words? This *virtuality* changes as conditions change. The protagonist chose to counter-balance the expectation of “cuteness” with “naughtiness”, until they decided to make “cute” their own, give it new meaning and break its opposing connection to “naughty”.

In cognitive linguistics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, pp. 3-6) have framed metaphor as a primary device for structuring abstract concepts by grounding them in embodied and cultural experience. This metaphorical power of language, the performative manifestation of its endless potential, is also its transformative *virtuality* – a useful term when it comes to identity formation – the same *virtuality* the heroine used to create and find, on the crossroads of essentialism and relationality, their identity.

The linguistic dimension of identity

“Identity” can be treated like any abstract concept, such as “love”, “justice”, “freedom”, “knowledge”: It’s a metaphor-dependent term, an essentially unstable notion. The awareness of identity’s instability leads the protagonist through a non-linear, bumpy process to the realization that it’s possible to reconstitute the self through available linguistic, cultural and personal material resources. While from an essentialist point of view this means moving from a fixed point of selfhood to another, according to the relational, interactive scope one can embrace the previously perceived “instability” as a natural state of constant flow.

Constant flow as a state of being is not a new concept. Heraclitus refers to flow as the only inherent quality of all existence and for Hegel the essence of things is a constant becoming. In later centuries, as interest in the individual grew and the self was systematically discussed in western thought, the relational, interactive and non-static qualities traditionally tied to existence were explicitly attributed to language and identity.

The fluidity and intentionality of identity, in turn, has been extensively and inevitably discussed in relation to gender. The post-modernist Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990, p. 45) and *Undoing Gender* (2004, pp. 1-16) supports the concept of performativity: Identity is not a stable, inherent essence but is continuously shaped through repeated social and linguistic

Despite any personal objections, being born a female automatically implied that I was an upcoming "woman".

Of course, a girl at the beginning of the 1980s (at least in Athens, Greece) carried a set of desired characteristics: For pre-puberty those would be "cuteness" and "mildness".

Some elements are unique to the Greek context: Greece invented democracy (excluding women and slaves); established Christianity (eradicating goddesses), and the labyrinthine Byzantine Empire (celebrating client politics); underwent Ottoman rule (for further suppression). After more than 400 years it emerged as a new territory composed of mostly Balkan ethnic groups sharing a common language and religion, and after WWII suffered a civil war and a dictatorship. In Greece, where Church and State are bound together to this day and whose official name is "Hellas" (as "Greece" is connected to a lowly, occupied past and doesn't inspire greatness), in the 1980's every house and school had icons on prominent display. In this context, "cuteness" and "mildness" had a serious ethical dimension, and the lack of decorum explicitly pointed to sin, of which women were considered guilty by default.

I was bound to fail in both "cuteness" and "mildness", to such an extent that my great-grandmother, an independent and fierce woman, told my mother when I was four that she should lock me up in reform school: I was "naughty". This was the other side of the "smart" coin, and enough fuel to set a little witch on fire.

While he was already on the failing side, his yet unsuspecting parents handed him the toys he enjoyed most. He loved his cars and his remote-controlled Jeep; his marbles, his Lego and his Playmobil: the red truck and horses of every color, that he placed side by side. And then, his instruments: his first Yamaha keyboards that his parents brought from Germany; his metallophone with the bright red, yellow, green, purple and blue keys, and the sweet, piercing sound of the high notes.

performances. Especially for children, play is the territory where performativity is exercised.

From a linguistic and philosophical standpoint, the meaning of “girl” is not fixed but emerges from overlapping biological, social, and cultural constructs that may vary. For Butler, first in *Gender Trouble* (p.43) and then in *Bodies that Matter* (1993, p. 9), the term “girling of the girl” refers to the way in which gender norms are enacted, embodied, and made to appear natural.

Repetition, performativity and gender

Repetitive performances – the reiteration of specific behaviors, gestures, and roles – generate normative (i.e., culturally and socially conditioned) gender identities. These performances do not reflect an essential truth about the individual but instead shape what it means to be eg. a “girl”.

Thus the girling of the girl is the process of internalizing and enacting societal pressures and cultural norms that effectively creates an impression of what “girl” means, and serves it as natural and inherent, as is demonstrated in the narrative.

The “outside” was for the protagonist an escape from this pressure. Before Butler, while developing her prototype theory, Eleanor Rosch (1978) noticed that the definition of “girl” is shifting across historical periods, cultures, and personal experiences.

In different contexts, “girl” may carry connotations of youth, dependency, or even resistance, which indicates what Butler also supports, that identity, to the degree at least that it is bound to gender, is in flux.

In this story, “girl” implied primarily a carefree, sensible and docile future caretaker, procreator, spouse. Modernity and the desire to belong to the West, on the other hand, brought in the game roles of controlled progressivity and a limited financial independence, which created significant new affordances.

Gender and hybrid societies in the story

In this context, girls were seen through a traditional lens of femininity: youth also implied an almost forced innocence, domesticity, and the

Even though my toys of choice were enough to keep me busy for hours, I had even more dolls, gifted from relatives and family friends who came at dinners and knew me under the general description "girl". Along with the dolls came questions: "How many children are you going to have when you grow up?", "Who are you going to marry?".

There were only a few dolls she really liked – and by any mean aesthetic standard those were the "ugly" ones.

Her favorite one was a rag doll with vivid blue spikey hair and a plain beige dress. Was she the only one who could get lost in her shiny dark blue eyes, and spend hours combing the unruly hair with her fingers?

Barbie dolls, on the other hand, suffered slow deaths in cute dresses of glittery pink sequin and flowery white cotton. They had their best on, elegant peep-toes and permanent make-up included. They were seated next to each other – with the occasional poor Ken or his Greek knock-off twin, John-John, like lost strangers with dubious intentions – in a dark makeshift room in the bottom self of my closet. I had made it cozy with an old mattress from a large doll's pram and they stayed still there, with locked smiles, abducted by a girl who never felt empathy for them: The teeth marks on their hands and feet and their cut-short hair told a gruesome tale.

Following the discovery of a decapitated doll's body, he often overheard concerned whispers in the corridor, confidential exchanges between his mother and grandparents regarding his "violent" tendencies.

When they weren't creating worlds of adventure or sorrow, they played outside.

The days and the mud puddles in the tangle of empty lots seemed endless in a city that still, miraculously, had underdeveloped corners which attracted children with brakeless bikes and half-inflated balls like sewers attract rats.

future roles of mother or wife, as femininity was closely tied to nurturing, passivity, and emotionality.

Eastern influences added layers of respect for authority, and an emphasis on familial duty or moral propriety, and were shaped through expectations around behavior, dress, and interactions with men, who were perceived as superior.

Hybrid societies have special challenges in store for their members. What defines how a girl behaves and is perceived is, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1979, pp. 72-73), the *habitus*, i.e., the set of acquired social dispositions one uses to navigate the habitat. A girl growing up in an environment rooted in both European individualism and Eastern familialism must negotiate between different, sometimes opposing, sets of expectations: one that encourages self-assertion and personal ambition and another that demands modesty, deference, and family duty.

The temptation to succumb to a binary interpretation of hybridity is strong: Hybridity on the one hand offers richness, as it enables individuals to draw from multiple cultural sources, allowing the development of more fluid, dynamic identities. On the other hand, it imposes additional pressures, as one is constantly navigating between different, often conflicting, social norms. For example a girl, like the one in this story, might be encouraged to study and become professionally successful, and at the same time be expected to conform to traditional gender roles. This dualistic view of the hybrid cultural influence described above, combined with an essentialist view of identity, can leave in certain contexts a very distinct mark, one that W.E.B. Du Bois described as *double consciousness* (1903, p. 3).

The restrictions and opportunities of double consciousness

The *habitus* and the *habitat* that Du Bois was observing – those of marginalized black individuals whose heritage was competing with the dominant American culture – were different than those experienced by the heroine of this story. Nevertheless, the analogy is there: External competing forces cause internal rupture.

When the main character stepped outside the designated social boundaries, they encountered what phenomenologists, feminist thinkers

The elation they felt “outside”, the earthy stiffness of dirt that stayed with them as lived memory, offered later the necessary connection to what existed beyond an unbearable reality, to what wasn’t yet realized but was nevertheless real, like a seed that waited under the earth for the conditions that would come as surely as spring comes after winter.

I can’t forgive the class bias for making “dirty” such a negative word. There, in the dirt, I played hide and seek, tag, dodgeball, but most of all I played football with the boys, I fought with the boys, I explored dilapidated buildings and climbed fig trees with the boys. In my mind I was one of them, whatever that was.

She was proclaimed a “tomboy”.

She was strong-willed, resolute, talkative and loud. On good days those characteristics would make her a “leader” but on bad days and since all she could actually lead was her shiny army of marbles, they just made her “stubborn”.

The neighborhood kids she represented during disputes with elderly neighbors would say: “You should become a lawyer”. The “mischievous” classmates she defended in front of the teacher and the family members she argued with agreed.

But I was mostly interested in dark worlds full of magic, losing myself in the midday high-summer heat in my uncle’s back-up library in the family’s seaside retreat: Greek philosophers, diving manuals, Indian poets, interior design luxury photobooks, Eastern mystics, National Geographic magazines, André Gide and Dostoyevsky, all devoured by the age of ten, words and images taking their shape, even when what lay between the lines remained obscure. I admired the beauty of words as such, and meaning remaining a mystery was part of the charm. I was reading endlessly, resting my gaze from time to time on the breezy wild-pistachio tree “outside”. The tree obstructed the view to the sun-and-salt-burned fields next to the summer house, and all I wanted to become was a diver, or an astronaut.

and psychoanalysts describe as the “gaze of the Other”, a “moment” of friction when the subject becomes hyper-aware of how they are seen and judged, which in turn shifts their experience of themselves. In a contemporary understanding of double consciousness, the gaze of the Other – important in the regulation of identity by social power structures – manifests in the performances of the *habitat* and the *habitus*, and is central in the shaping of identity. The female child in our story was changing to fit the options - the affordances - which were at their disposal.

Metaphorical and literal external structures

Simone de Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex* (1949, p. 301) how external structures influence self-perception and possibilities. With external structures de Beauvoir refers to eg. social norms, institutions, and historical narratives. In this story such structures are mainly represented in the family and the immediate surroundings of the protagonist. They reinforce limited identities (eg. the binary “truck driver” vs “graceful”), shape aspirations and impact self-perception: Expectations are often internalized and lead to self-doubt, a sense of inadequacy, and fear of stepping outside assigned roles.

Michel Foucault also works explicitly with the concept of external power exercised on and forming the individual internally, through self-surveillance and normalization (1975, pp. 195-228). The heroine’s first move was indeed to retract, feeling unable to cope with the normalizing demand, and later to push back.

However threatening the “outside” can be under certain circumstances, there is another possibility for it. In this story, it isn’t a place to be feared but the key to being free.

Gaston Bachelard explores in *The Poetics of Space* (1958, pp. 4-5) how physical spaces shape inner landscapes by influencing how we imagine movement and escape. The outside – here, either dreaming of oceanic depths and cosmic space or finding support in perceived similarities with external cultural agents – becomes a site of transformation. Perhaps more importantly, Bachelard’s work reinforces the idea that identity is not just formed and negotiated within boundaries but in relation to what lies beyond them.

“Stubborn” belongs to the “you should become a lawyer” category: most of the time it’s a well-meant, even friendly, label, uttered by people with your best interest in mind. It’s the same lot that urges you to become a lawyer, but from the flip side: “stubborn” is used when you don’t comply – when you refuse, for example, to wear skirt-suits or dance at parties.

And since adjectives have their own clusters and spectrums, and despite its seeming innocence, “stubborn” often meant “controversial”, “naysayer” and “quarrelsome”.

The waters are dangerous at the fuzzy borders of Meaning:

For me, “stubborn” is a compliment. It’s my strength of character. For me “stubborn” means “assertive” and that’s all I aspired to be at that age (besides diver and astronaut).

But even “assertive”, the good side of “stubborn”, when assigned to a “girl” – especially from mouths conditioned in regressive patriarchies with theocratic habits, stuck between the East and the West – often fails to sound positive.

And in such societies, being a “stubborn tomboy” has an expiration date.

Luckily, the plastic young mind also had a secret safe place “inside”: Due to an official grammar reform that had been misinterpreted and overgeneralized, his name changed – officially briefly: Instead of having the stress on the a, the female “Exárchou” (genitive of “Exarchos”) was now stressed on the E, like the male nominative “Éxarchos”. After the necessary clarifications were made, surnames were brought to order and female names were rushed back to dropping their stresses. He kept the changed name, and with it the symbolic uniqueness of his selfhood.

I got my first period when I was ten. At the time such an event was explicitly phrased as “becoming a woman”.

“What lies beyond”, the ability first to imagine and then to realize existence in positive terms, is central in the story.

More ways out

Perceiving the self as a negotiable value, when it arises as an idea through internalized conflict - which individuals experience because of racial, cultural, gendered, and class-based tensions and as they constantly measure themselves through the eyes of others - opens up the possibility of a certain, if perhaps limited, fluidity.

Reworking the performative acts that shape identity is a form of resistance and a site of creation. Given the chance, one can use instability as a site of agency, play with performativity and subvert expectations way beyond the limits that double consciousness dictates. For the child, this performative site is play and for the adolescent it is the adoption of cultural expressions, such as dress, music, and habit.

Play and performativity

For the protagonist, the clash with assigned roles was first evident in the deeply symbolic destruction of Barbie dolls – probably an unconscious rejection of the hyper-feminine ideal, but also something beyond that.

Elizabeth Sweet (2014) portrays how rigid binaries that dictate what is considered appropriate play for boys and girls became more and more prevalent in the toy industry from the 1970s onwards. Girls’ toys overwhelmingly emphasized beauty, domesticity, and nurturing, while boys’ toys promoted action, construction, and competition.

However, Sweet’s research suggests that while toy marketing enforces norms, children still engage in individual meaning-making, thus negotiating, resisting, or reinterpreting the roles assigned to them. In this sense, destroying Barbie dolls or embracing being “weird” and “strange” in the story isn’t only an act of negation but also an act of construction:

The character chooses the “ugly” doll and later the “misfits” as a counter-performance, but moves effectively to assigning feelings of care and love to them as they successfully become the character’s own means of engaging

Society tolerated me, a female child, when I acted as a boy, and it half-embraced my half-boyhood – until my body started to change visibly.

My whole world positioned itself differently around me then and it expected that I would do the same towards it.

In circles that I trusted – my family, my school, my gymnastics team – behaviors started changing along with my changing body, but in an opposite direction. I was being punished as my body started to flourish: I was being laughed at because my breasts filled up my leotards; at the summer house I wasn't allowed to visit the boys next door, the boys I'd eaten dirt and chased locusts with, due to unspoken dangers of a sexual nature; my mother – with her beauty treatments, her long nails and fashion magazines – would correct me because I walked "like a boy" and talked "like a truck driver", and strongly urged me to take ballet classes in order to become "graceful". Ballet lasted a year and it was a disaster: I didn't belong, couldn't achieve, or fit in. My grace, if any, was that of the footballer, or at best, that of the swimmer. However, competitive swimming "would give me broad shoulders" and this was "not nice for a woman".

Her changing body became a source of shame and a hindrance instead of pride and joy.

However, he was "stubborn", and growing up he didn't change his ways.

By the time she was twelve, with a fully developed body, the gap between her and what was expected of her had grown wider. As girls grew, expectations weren't limited to being "cute" and "mild" but extended to being "modest", "prudent" and "quiet". Hanging out with the boys, and especially with the "bad" boys, was enough to set off a general alarm and to label her "wild". To top her confusion off, her positive attribute, being "smart", wasn't "cool" anymore, but "nerdy".

with and negotiating identity. “Ugly”, but also “tough”, become irrelevant and untrue as the doll is transformed through positive attributes.

The stake here is to find what possibilities open up between “ugly” and “tough” and their binary opposites, i.e., “beautiful” and “weak”.

Categories and the encoding of social approval

The habitus becomes part of the negotiation within the performative realm and plays an important role in the interpretation of abstract binaries such as “ugly” vs “beautiful”. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966, p. 2) discusses the word “dirt” and argues that “dirt” is not an absolute concept but a cultural and symbolic construct: what is considered “dirty” often reflects societal structures and power dynamics rather than objective reality.

Pierre Bourdieu examines in *Distinction* (1979, pp. 184-185) how aesthetic and moral judgments (such as the aversion to “dirtiness”) reinforce class hierarchies. The negative connotation of “dirty” frequently aligns with working-class labor, physicality and environments deemed undesirable by the status quo.

In many cultures, households gain a certain sense of dignity by being impeccably clean, a desire that extends to the children, who shouldn’t get their clothes dirty. Playing outside and making mud soups is frowned upon.

This bias embeds itself in language, where clean becomes a metaphor for moral and social purity, while “dirty” denotes disorder, inferiority, or even transgression. Language encodes social approval or disapproval, as labels fluctuate along axes of prestige, agency, and desirability.

Close to this notion is George Lakoff’s *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987, pp. 5-6), and particularly his discussion on framing and how categories are shaped by cognitive and social structures. The same behavior can be framed positively (“leader”) or negatively (“stubborn”), depending on factors like age, gender, and perceived legitimacy, in the same way that a word (eg. “Greek”) implies both positive and negative attributes depending on the context.

Eventually, even for his friends, the silent successors of patriarchal normativity, he was a “girl”.

We were “different” and our inner circle not only failed to protect us but added to the damage by passively supporting the role of the “subordinate” that was synonymous to our assigned gender and we were reminded of every day, in all our interactions. Under such pressure, our world, our sense of self, collapsed.

Few opportunities are more fortunate than an identity crisis, provided that you will survive it.

The defenses she built during her teenage years were first based on rejecting the world that was trying to box her – the “superficial”, “money-worshiping” suburban comfort – a rejection she expressed by not conforming to the desired standard of cuteness and mildness. Her assertiveness now made her “tough” and “strong”, smoking and drinking at thirteen, very consciously denouncing god, cutting her hair very short, staying out late.

Still with the boys. Always with the boys.

While they were morphing through a deep feeling of injustice into something “weird”, the resources they had access to offered a sense of community and belonging: Long walks in nature; the local CD-store; an underground scene at the edge of the known world – the center of Athens; a guitar; art that made “strange” a good thing; the “misfits” who accepted them.

Although the “wholeness” of a core self is a construct, although nothing in us remains unmovable, I needed the concept of “identity” as one needs a roof over their head.

Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* (1997) is also relevant, as it examines how language describes and performs social positioning: what one is called can shape what one becomes.

Social validation as a shaping force

People gain a sense of social validation and cohesion from the idea that those around them carry the same opinions as they do (false-consensus effect). The collapse of this bias, when accompanied by contrasting social expectations, as discussed above, can lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, and abandonment.

The microsociologist Ian Hacking (1999) also supports that the categories available to us shape the way we see ourselves: “weird”, “girl”, “stubborn”. In fiction, the name has a recurring centrality in the shaping of identity – for example in Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) or in Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) knowing or remembering one's name holds immense power. And although the concept of the name or the origin as metaphor is situated in essentialism, it can function as a balancing force or as a restraint, depending on its associations.

The hybridity of the cross-cultural society and the exposure to multiple affordances, created in the main character the desire to explore, to escape categories, name and origin and become “other” than what was expected by the norm. The ensuing rupture was not situated just in the will to destroy the old framework, but in the need to create a new one, beyond what was available by default.

I had to choose new vocabulary, to build

A frame

“worthy”

a house

“beautiful”

a room

“warm”

where I could feel

“capable”

and safe

to exist

allowed to be and to become

“lovable”

and try and fail and try.

I, she, he, we, you, they made it through.

Language as territory

Even what is given by default can be subject to change. Words are not defined in isolation but exist in relational networks, where core meaning influences adjacent terms (Rosch, 1973). This is also the territory of negotiation.

Language encodes implicit biases and social expectations, and clusters descriptors in affective and evaluative spectrums. “Young”, for example, skews in specific contexts towards negativity (“unsuitable”, “naive” etc.) and it is part of a broader lexical field that frames certain characteristics in a systematic manner.

Pierre Bourdieu in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) discusses how semantic fields carry a social weight and shape perception through repeated association. Thus, the seemingly innocent “mother” becomes suspect, as linguistic proximity pulls it into a specific semantic field.

To affect the pull one needs to shift the habitus.

External structures as labels

Individuals navigate social roles through performance, but when external expectations contradict one’s own (perhaps unformed) sense of self, the result can be alienation rather than coherence, as is the case with the individual in our story who explores identity through roles, such as motherhood, that carry certain expectation. Labels, even when framed as guidance or care, can become instruments of erasure, shaping what one feels capable of becoming.

Ian Hacking (1999) tells us that labels do not simply describe pre-existing realities but actively bring new kinds of people into being. Labels such as “woman”, “artist”, “middle-aged”, “single”, “mother” do not just express facts but bear external judgment that alters self-concept, reinforcing or undermining one’s sense of belonging. But how stable are labels?

Chapter II

*“What horrifies me most is the idea of being
useless: well-educated, brilliantly
promising, and fading out into
an indifferent middle age”.*

- Sylvia Plath

Dear child,

Your mother, the stubborn, didn't just break a hopelessly dry code of conduct – she broke the code of essentialism. The binary code that forced her into an artificial existence of either “this” or “that”. A code enforced by dualistic perception. Your mother, the controversial, found unity in multiplicity, after having rejected role after role after role, playing life by ear, creating her own affordances when there were none. This is what uniqueness is: Our individual way of perceiving and performing identity, not as static repetition but as dynamic improvisation of deconstructed routines. And we are all unique, and yet the same.

Your mother, the adventurous, cracked the code, and this is how she did it:

Your mother, the visitor, hadn't felt “Greek” until she moved abroad. It was through the words of others that the boundaries of Greekness were defined. Ethnicity became a space for negotiation of her personal values and worth. And what was Greece for her?

There was her mother. Your grandmother. Lying in a hospital bed. The window was open, the white cotton curtain moved with the breeze, the sunlight came in clear and mellow. “An olive tree, a vineyard, and a boat”, she mockingly recited Elytis, who had reduced a nation and its sociopolitical struggles to a postcard for retired tourists. What was Greece?

Yesterday in the Netherlands it was cloudy.

In a conservative, gendered framework, a male “artist” may be associated with innovation, courage, genius. Behaviors that challenge authority and reject conventional expectations of politeness or restraint, when coming from cis males are often viewed and romanticized as a form of untamed masculinity.

When females claim the role of e.g. the “writer” they are often dismissed as superficial and foolish. Labels such as “frivolous” or “sentimental” mean that they fail to conform to the male ideal of processing information and expressing thought and feeling, and when they rebel they get marked as socially deviant in a way that is rarely applied to boys (Bourdieu, 1998).

Phenomenology emphasizes how the body is not just an object in the world but a site of lived experience, shaped by social expectations (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 35). When someone is labeled “frivolous”, with all the social implications the word carries, and “sensitive” for demonstrating unexpected behavior, they do not simply carry those external labels but experience this judgment as embodied reality that affects how they move, speak, and inhabit space. Alignment, modification or rejection of the norm, becomes embodiment, an action.

Perceived difference understandably reinforces in any character the desire to be “other” from what was socially assigned to them, which in turn manifests in embodied counter-performativity. The rejection of societal labels, eg. by embracing performative representations of “wealthy” vs “poor”, potentially mirrors Jacques Derrida’s critique of fixed identities and hierarchical oppositions (i.e., binary structures with uneven power distribution).

Breaking out of the binary

According to Derrida (1967), meaning is never stable but always deferred (*différance*), and in this sense rebellion becomes an act of resisting final definitions. The subject resists being boxed by deconstructing the very language and expectations that attempt to define them. Derrida argues that identity is not a closed system but an evolving negotiation, and these moments of rupture are not just sites of destruction but also of rebirth.

Walking through her old neighborhood, she felt a stranger, but somehow burdened with the feelings of the past, lingering as they were like strong smells of food already cooked and eaten. She didn't belong in that place, as she didn't belong in her new place, that was mirroring this one, but in the North: Stuck between two mirrors, the perpetual reflection created another dimension, that of the ghosts who walk between men and go through walls.

Going through walls implies extraordinary freedom, but it comes with the cost of not being seen.

But she was seen, first and foremost through her own eyes: "Solitary", "deft", "scattered", "melancholic". Or was it "brave", "energetic", "curious", "empathetic"? And through the eyes of others: An "alien" from the land that "birthed democracy, philosophy, and the sciences as disciplines to be studied and advanced". Or was she an offspring of the "poor" and "lazy" South? Was wisdom her birthright or was she a crook by default? The verdict was never reached. In fact, your mother, the migrant, was this and a million things in between and beyond. But she didn't know it yet.

Even before she realized that she possessed the superpower of shape-shifting, she took Georgia O'Keeffe's statement that "flattery and criticism go down the same drain" at heart and did the same with all assumptions, both good and bad. Besides, they were both girls who had resisted the girling.

And drama was not truly in her nature.

It hadn't crossed her mind that her mother, your grandmother, would get sick. On the contrary, she was certain that this legend, this sorceress, would outlive her. Yet, there she was, lying in a hospital bed, her face a yellow so deep that it looked green.

Your mother, the wanderer, was searching in her mind for the lost time, as she was biting on a madeleine she picked with a smirk at the hospital cafeteria, with coffee instead of tea. She never liked madeleines but Proust's dreamy rhythm suited the back-and-forth in memories that would potentially explain what had happened between "you're too young and inexperienced" and "you're too old and irrelevant". At least, the beginning of her forties did feel like a beginning. A non-linear, relative understanding of Time opened up Space for her.

A mother was lying in a bed in front of your mother. Not yet defeated.

How can we avoid a constant cycle of deconstruction, an existence situated in (self-)negation? Movement on an oppositional axis limits the creation of new affordances. We need to re-imagine the self in constructive terms, to develop further expressions of becoming.

Deleuze offers one of the most positive and insightful takes on rebellion (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980): He discusses the concept of *lines of flight*, where rebellion is seen as a breakaway from a rigid system, a movement towards an alternative form of being, and particularly towards a becoming-other, which offers new possibilities for subjectivity.

In this process, Deleuze's earlier concept of *virtuality* (1966) is useful, as it opens up possibilities to all the latent realities that haven't actualized yet. In these terms, identity is not viewed as a fixed, internal truth but as a set of virtual tendencies that take form in unforeseen ways.

The virtuality of language

Language participates in this generative process of (constant) transformation: it disrupts fixed identities and nominative norms and leads to new ways of being. Together with Guattari, Deleuze gives hope in a seeming dead-end maze of structures, categories, and norms, bringing deterritorialization in the mix, a randomness that causes meaning to leak and fracture, and to escape rigid classification.

In the same way that “sensitive” slips away from its assigned place and becomes “weak” and “emotional”, triggered by a change of habitus it takes a different direction and gains the attributes of “strong” and “intelligent”. Accordingly, we can follow the course of eg. gender-related words, such as “gay” and “queer” (just to name two) that first had neutral or even positive meaning, then became carriers of gendered hatred and later were turned into generative identity categories, tools of resistance and sources of pride.

Language carries the potential to be something other within itself. When it unsettles dominant structures, new vocabularies and grammars of selfhood emerge. As the wise Steve Rushton once said: “If language got us into this mess, it will get us out of it”.

For your mother, the inquiring, “mother” was a difficult term, a scary word, a ticked box. Inevitably she would compare herself to her own mother. And to the ideal of the mother. And to other mothers. More definitions that didn’t fit just right, slant looks and question marks that felt more like pejoratives.

How many sides does a coin have? Once you throw it in the air, does it ever stop spinning?

Ethnic identity, family roles, relationship status, age group, social status, financial status, profession. A perpetual search for identity in ideas of herself manifested as dreams and uncertainties, and in the eyes, words and gestures of others. Different expectations than those she had faced in her youth – different conversations to have with herself.

By now she was a chameleon, better at shedding old skin, mastering transformation as a way of life. And if “artist” felt like a compass in its forgiving breadth, she would no longer grab at it like a railing in the storm.

Of course, battles had been given. Where she came from no one dared to call themselves “artist”, “writer”, “archeologist”, “philologist”, “scholar”. These titles were only for some great committee to assign, and one should have specific characteristics to be deemed worthy of them: preferably be male, with a scarf around the neck, maybe a moustache and a pipe.

Your mother, the creative, felt closer to the “sensitive” and the “crazy”, a rather populous group of artists, as another cliché would have it. Some of the favorite female literary figures of her student years – Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf – gave her hope through the magnificent way they counter-performed not just femininity, but life itself.

And although art was certainly a way to happiness, it was definitely not the way to the money. Clear goals, built careers, social contracts – lines she had to tip-toe through in a weird dance. A wrong move and the alarm would be set off.

A cultivated sense of precarity experienced by all but of which none dared to talk about. Stigma.

And so much was being talked about: Color, gender, mental health. Suddenly everyone seemed to be digging into their childhoods in the newest revival of psychotherapy: the social media psychology. People were thinking in terms of attachment styles, overusing and abusing

The potential as narrative

Cognitive psychology, social psychology and philosophy converge on the idea that the self is not a fixed entity but an evolving story, shaped by memory, perception, and the social world. The need for virtuality is evident in the arts and in the way we extend and branch out our lives through narratives. The Story is in such a powerful tool for generating potential that in fact the self can be seen as a narrative construct:

Kenneth Gergen argues in *The Saturated Self* (1991) that identity is not a fixed essence but a continuous process of reconstruction shaped by personal and social narratives.

Paul Ricoeur explores the telling and retelling of stories as a force that constructs and continuously reshapes individual and communal identities (1991), integrating past experiences into a coherent whole (1992). “Mother” transforms as a word, gains new personal meaning as a carrier of identity, as it integrates the stories told around it.

Cognitive psychologists such as Jerome Bruner and Antonio Damasio reinforce this idea: While Bruner (1991) describes the narrative manner of categorizing experiences, Damasio (1999) discusses the autobiographical self, explaining how memory and emotion construct an ongoing sense of personal identity.

Is continuity and evolving coherence the only way of perceiving what we call “self”? The more we diversify the ways in which we construct our narratives and open up our understanding of what constitutes a narrative, the more affordances we create for escaping the need for a linear perception of the self and for defining personal happiness in Bildungsroman terms. Open approaches to language and storytelling open our potential to (self-)realization.

The social dimension as epilogue

The malleability of identity seems to be based on affordances, semantic shifts, lines of flight, virtuality and narrative constructs. It is important to remember that, besides being a context-dependent phenomenon, identity

questionable definitions, such as “narcissist”, overcharging words until they lost their meaning, like a stomach that one overfeeds until it loses its elasticity.

And the more the world seemed to understand itself the more it plunged into absurdity: Trump was inaugurated and promised all the things “progress” had been trying to abolish.

What about poverty? She thought. The poverty line above the official poverty line. The less visible one. The perpetual Great Depression of people whose circumstances couldn't justify their condition. A poverty that appeared to be reserved as punishment for those who diverged from the norm, and of which more and more people felt worthy of suffering. The poor felt guilty of their own poverty.

“Poor” bore the ultimate stigma. It was worse than “addict”, although the two were often closely related.

If the addict was “sick” the poor obviously did something “wrong”, that made them poor. “What could they have done better?” The question was out of focus. There was a more urgent question to be asked: What had happened to the middle class and why wasn't anyone talking about it?

Your mother, the empath, felt that “shame” was a general feeling, reinforced by a picture-perfect, totalitarian image of prosperity. And although there had been dialogues opened and spaces created for voices to be heard, these discussions and the open spaces were distributed unevenly and would never be enough.

There was still distance between public discourse and experienced reality.

At certain moments, it could have even been said that the world was regressing. However, through this sense of common “defeat” new lines of flight were created, new cracks in the seams of meaning, and of living.

The terminally ill learn to live day by day. It is amazing how time opens up to include not just one but multiple lifetimes in a few days, a few hours, or moments, without pain. It's not just adjusting, it's reconstructing. Your grandmother was evidence.

The world was also changing slowly, just like language, just like every living organism. Alliances were formed, myths debunked, hierarchies questioned. And as long as there was movement, there was life.

is a socially negotiated one, shaped and re-shaped through constant interaction, feedback, and cultural scripts.

Changing the frame of interaction and drawing our terms from a new habitus changes the categories available and provides supportive conditions for negotiating identity.

Meaningful interaction (caring for, communicating with, listening to each other) creates and sustains the potential for viable, empathic realities and constitutes artificial divisions irrelevant.

In other words, this is where true value lies.

Your mother, the visionary, could see this life in your eyes. In the play, the resistance and the experimentation, when you wanted to have your hair long, your shirts glittery, your nails painted like the rainbow. The Norm has always been for you a fictional monster from another dimension, and this is how you treated it when you came face to face.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” someone asked you mockingly in the football field when you were ten. “I am myself” you answered, and kept on kicking your ball, and being, and becoming. The Norm had come to find you and you had beaten it, and came out almost unscathed.

About a year later, your mother, the evolving, showed someone your picture: “He looks – He looks so... Soft”, that person said, and the letters came out of their mouth one by one, sticky with surprise. Your mother smiled and nodded. She paused. Yes, she thought. He is soft – because he was allowed to be. And with this incantation, relational magic happened:

“Mother” transformed before her eyes from a scary, solitary word to a safe space that she provided, not as a unit but as an organic part of a stirring whole.

Did your mother need this epiphany? Is there indeed a single moment in our lives when it all makes sense? How can we find peace in randomness? Our kind has been striving manically for order, for causality, for explanations and definitions. Yet, we have no control over most things that matter.

My dear child, everybody’s child, stay close to what gives you room for infinite change. Stay close to art and literature, to nature as the ever-changing paradigm, to the people who have flower fields, oceans and skies inside them. Be a diver and an astronaut, take your dolls, your cars and your marbles, your instruments and your friends by the hand, and just play.

*Best,
Uncle Heraclitus*

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